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ABSTRACT

As interest in distance education increases, many university instructors are experimenting with listserv discussion within their courses. Six educational technology professors at four universities initiated a listserv discussion group within their various classes for 52 graduate students. Discussion topics were four general themes within educational technology and distance education: regulatory issues, instructional design, sociopolitical issues, and technologies. Student participation was required and graded. Instructors provided guidelines for participation. This paper provides student analysis of listserv activity, reaction to the discussion list, and content of the discussion. Students evaluated content, form, style, and tone of the list traffic, looking for patterns of communication. Student analysis included: factors influencing message frequency; problems with listserv message content; problems with message identification and referencing to related messages; and recommendations for future listserv use and analysis. (SWC)

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Participant Analysis of a Multi-Class, Multi-State, On-Line, Discussion List

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Abstract

A interest in distance education increases, man instructors are experimenting with listserve discussion within their graduate courses. This paper seeks to include the students' perspective about the discussion list activity and offers an analysis of the value of the activity. Analysis areas of focus include the content, form, styles, and tone of the list discussion as well as perceived instructional value, patterns of gender influence, issues of power and control, and suggestions for improved future activity.

Interest in distance education is increasing and many instructors are experimenting with different communication techniques within their courses (Willis, 1994). Part of the appeal of distance education is the result of access to e-mail and similar computer-supported communication. As more people become involved with the distance activities, there is a need to examine and evaluate what works well for instructional purposes in various situations.

In an effort to stimulate ideas and discussion beyond the typical classroom experience, six instructors of the Educational Technology at four different universities initiated a discussion group for 52 graduate students within their various classes. The classes were all distinctly different, but had common interest areas related to the general field of study. The instructors selected four theme topics that could carry across the usual boundaries of specific course content and time frames in to a general discourse about educational technology and distance education. The four theme were *regulatory issues, instructional design, sociopolitical issues*, and *technologies*.

Organization and advance planning were critical. While the faculty members integrated the on-line discussion differently in their classes, they all required students participation. A portion of the student's grades were based upon the quality of their participation in the on-line discussion . Instructors each provided guidelines to their own students about how to actively participate in meaningful discussions. For example, in one class two students took turns moderating the discussion each week, and in another class one students took the responsibility for moderating the discussion all semester.

Each class of students was assigned one of the four theme topics to moderate or focus on throughout the duration of a semester. Students carried on a lively conversation and the instructors analyzed the listserve activity from their perspective, making suggestions for improvements as appropriate. In addition, the instructors surveyed the students for their reactions to the activity.

The Problem

Although the instructor evaluation of the listserve activity is valuable, it does not truly account for student reactions to the events beyond what the instructors believed was important. This paper seeks to include the students' perspective about the discussion list and is offered as a student analysis of the value of the activity. No matter how valuable the instruction seems to be from an instructor's perspective, it will fall sort of expectations if it does not meet the needs of the students.

For this study, all students in one class joined together to analyze the list activity. They assessed their reactions to the discussion list and analyzed the actual content of the discussions as well. Using elements from reader response theory, they evaluated the content, form, style, and tone of the list traffic, looking for patterns of communication that emerged. They found various patterns within the list correspondence and have made recommendations for improved future activity based upon those patterns. The students also provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of personal reactions to the activity and have suggestions based upon their experiences.

Instructors believed that organization, collaboration, and flexibility were the key ingredients in hold student-led on-line discussions, but they failed to recognize the importance of the students' feelings, reactions, and responses

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as the semester evolved. As the participants, the students shaped the course of the discussion, responding or not responding as they chose, elaborating in areas of interest, and debating when differences of opinions emerged.

Without collaboration of both faculty and students, the discussions would have been less successful. The collaborative approach could be described as instructor-initiated, student-to-student dialogues. Instructors had agreed to introduce the listserve to the students but to then stay out of it. Instructors intervened in the discussion very little and when they did so it was with the purpose of providing guidance an stimulating discussion. Instructors encouraged students to develop collaborative techniques for moderating and promoting in-depth discussions. At one point in time when a sensitive issue was raised, one student' "flamed" another, thus changing the course of the discussion. The "flamee" discusses in detail what led to the flame, how it was handled without instructor intervention, what affect it had on the group discussion, and what affect it had personally.

Students noticed that even though they were instructed to introduce themselves form a student role without the benefit of job titles and so on, some students identified job titles anyway and thus established a framework for exerting power and control over the other participants. Moderators sometimes changed the true flavor of a discussion when making a weekly summary, and although the summaries were viewed as helpful, they also had the potential to be distorted. What follows is some analysis of the discussion list from the students' perspective. They comment on the content, form, style, and tone of the list discussion as well as perceived value, patterns of gender influence, issues of power and control, and suggestions for improved future activity. This commentary is timely information that is needed to guide the design and practice of distance education efforts. It will be particular helpful as universities on different campuses and with different courses join in future collaborative efforts. It is important to point out in this case, that all classes had different content and reading materials, with the four common threads of discussion being viewed as overall, general themes that could carry across a full program of study, but not be specific to any one class.

Students Reactions on Survey

Although the full survey will be analyzed in a different paper that the faculty are writing, it will be helpful to note here that the course started out with 52 students. After a time, one class of students got frustrated at the level of discussion and dropped out, bringing the number down to 44 students who participated on a regular basis. No one outside of the class that dropped was told that the class droppped out and so it simply appeared as it there was less traffic on the discussion list. Because this class had user ideas that came from the same university as one of the other classes, no one else could know which classes they were in within that university. We found out after the fact that the discussions were at too high of a level and that the students who had dropped out were in an introductory instructional design course. They were not comfortable with the level of discussion and believed that they could not understand it nor contribute to it. This is undertandable since at least one of the other courses had an advanced distance class enrolled.

Of the 44 remaining students, 29 responded to survey that was distributed at the end of the semester and returned after the class had ended. Of those 29 students, 17 did not feel a sense of community with the group, 12 of them did. The large majority of students believed that the listserve experience helped them gain knowledge about distance education in general, listserves, and instructional design.

Student Analysis

Some students participated frequently in the discussion, while others did not particpate at all. There are several factors that might influence the message frequency. Some of them include:

- Course requirement for X number of messages
- Current threads
- Facility with the technology
- Access to the technology
- Demeanor of participants within a particular thread / language used
- Day of the week / period within the semester
- Gender

Problems within the Listserve:

1. Posturing within one's introduction. Participants were admonished to drive away from titles, credentials, etc. and focus on interest areas within their introductions in order to avert the development of a hierarchy within the TCLASS community.

2. Instructors should have indicated up front that the listserve contents would likely be analyzed. Hence the necessity of following message identification and content protocols would have been reinforced. This would have made it less troublesome in following threads and in contributing to them. As it was, the load of separating mislabeled messages was daunting.

3. Lack of facility with the technology for some users.

4. Lack of access to the technology for some users. (Time or Cost) This contributed to participants' latent responses to entries that had already been exhausted or otherwise evolved to some other topic.

5. Participants responding negatively to others rejection of any particular idea or to radically divergent shifts away from the original entry.

6. Participants responding negatively to inaccurate interpretations of questions or comments. This led to a brief interaction that ended with one participant (JLE) posting no entries after about one month.

7. Kinship between participants at various sites lead to discussions between themselves thus leaving others isolated from the discussion. There is evidence of electronic discussions going on individually between participants outside of listserve situation.

8. Lack of emotional maturity or intelligence and professionalism by some participants was exhibited by defensive posturing. Inappropriate word choice (use of "you-language") and name calling. This was documented among the males. Others expressed their dismay in various ways. Two people indicated that they were no longer interested in continuing as participants and one posted guidelines for constructive listserve activity.

9. Discussions were often merely truncated without closure. Discussions were characterized by polarity. Support for ones' commentary/opinion were too frequently drawn from personal observations and preferences as well as second party insight. References to research were uncommon. There was no accumulative summary directing future research.

10. Relevant topics were ignored or recognized only in passing. Foremost, credentialism was mentioned and then dismissed. The issues of accreditation and credibility should be consummate issues. Without endorsement by some esteemed agency, be it academic or professional, the student -aka consumer - is at the mercy of the marketplace. Additionally, what curriculum can be delivered successfully was not addressed. What can we offer given the technical and financial limitations within which we operate? What should we offer given these same limitations as well as within the context of meeting learner' various needs. Spinning off of the latter, we only superficially addressed student support services and the issues surrounding the topic. How do we justify what we offer if we cannot or will not provide essential student support according to learners' expectations? How do we honestly assess the cost-benefit ratio? How then do we project fiscal needs and attendant fee structures? Early on, classroom-technology layout was touched on briefly and its implications superficially explored. System Design on any scale was only nominally explored. Methods for system evaluation were ignored. It would seem that the cost benefit ratio, student persistence, and grade assignments are "good enough" barometers of system efficiency. Additionally, we never sought to compare the various modes of distance education. What parameters influence the teaching-learning interaction across full-motion ITV (analog or digital: DS-3 or ATM), compressed video teleconferencing (ISDN-based PictureTel or pots-based C-Me-C-You), and Web-based courses. What assumptions and referents guide our adoption of any particular mode? Which features are universal and which are unique? Do we attempt to emulate the traditional classroom under the assumption that that is the optimal condition and because of our esteemed traditions or do we challenge that thinking and adopt delivery and service protocols consistent with our findings?

11. It appears that participants, for the most part, did not anticipate the types of problems inherent of community development. It is evident that they initially looked to the instructors to mitigate problems with messaging logistics and possibly in resolving sore points. Participants of the list activity were reticent to grasp the enormity of establishing a community in which geographical and philosophical cliques already existed and within which a cadre of "authorities" allowed group dynamics to prevail. The evolution of TCLASS social norms; the groping for a sense of community at once with the establishment of individuality; looking to the instructors to resolve confrontational episodes; and ultimately holding one another accountable, albeit in a few instances, unprofessionally.

Problems with Listserve entries:

Entries to the list were sometimes confusing to follow. At the time of the list discussion, this served to be somewhat of an obstacle to smooth discussions, but it is unlikely that the students realized that these problems were

occurring or viewed it as anything more than irritating. During the analysis of the list logs, it became apparent that the majority of problems seemed to arise from a few main areas as noted below:

- Identification - who from where.
- Inconsistent use of Topic Headings.
- Messages that combined Topic Headings
- Sporadic messaging.
- Alien entries - Distance Learning class outsiders and other messages passed along.

While it would be undesirable to police or censor messages to the list, it would be helpful to find a way to make improvements in those areas. One way of doing that is to have the instructors moderate the list more closely and actually adjust material as appropriate. Since the instructors intended this list to be for the students, and took a hands-off approach in general, this would be out of character with the intention of the list.

An alternative that is within the character of the list's purpose, is to have the students take a more active role in moderating their own list activity. The instructors could provide more training for the students prior to starting the list activity, and then modify the expectation for students to moderate the list activity. For example, students could rotate moderating the list for the others, with higher expectations of what they will do. They were supposed to be doing this, but will need more knowledge and better incentives to make it happen in a better way.

Recommendations for Future Listserve:

Students who analyzed the list logs and the value of the activity, did not always agree on the interpretation of the experience, but it would be fair to say that they may very well have learned more from that analysis process than from their initial participation in the list. They suggest that improvements could be made in future listserve activity for any collaborative situation, by attending to two major areas, including establishing a sense of community and improving general communication.

1. Guidelines for establishing a community.

Establish them early on and model them in order to continually reinforce them. In fact these should be discussed at each site prior to listserve involvement. Furthermore, ways of identifying potential problems and how to allay them should also be dealt with prior to listserve involvement. In order to do this, all instructors will need to be involved in the planning process well in advance of the class and guidelines established for the students. Students will do better with more active participation of the instructors at the onset and throughout the semester.

2. General communication.

Can we control these problem sources? There will always be those who have a need to tell us more than any one of us needs to know or wants to know. Inappropriate word choices, intentional or not, will always emerge when ownership or validity of ideas are challenged. Some people are stuck in a you-language mode having yet to attain the skills of elevating a dialog to an impersonal plane in which it is the idea that we dissect and not the writer. It seems a lesson from "Get Over It - 101" and one from "Assertiveness & Tact - 102" would go a long way.

Recommendations for Listserve Analysis.

1. Readers must establish a concrete set of codes accounting for messaging problems that confound data extraction. Adaptations to this set of codes should be made before coding begins in order that re-coding is not necessary. General topic headings must be few and interest sub-headings must be discreet. (It would help if TCLASS participants would have used accurate headings instead of what was merely convenient.
2. Instructors for the course must establish under what conditions participation/membership is allowed and what messages shall be posted to the list and not violate those criteria. If an item is in doubt let the writer of the message post that message to the individuals toward whom it is aimed or post it to another list. The Listserve Moderator may then provide a pointer to the Listserve participants.
3. Readers must establish under what conditions a message will be deleted from the analysis. Alien messages which engaged TCLASS participants in discussions were allowed because they often served as impetus for a controversial idea or an new thread. Alien writers having no connection to the group beyond a passing interest or request for information should be discarded from the analysis.

Summary

Although there were several problems that emerged from this activity, the participants have learned that with some additional efforts the situation could be improved. One of the things that is important is to realize that we learn not only from what goes well, but from our mistakes. Both faculty and students made mistakes throughout

the semester and it is important to continue this effort of open communication to help improve the strategies that are used if this activity should be repeated. It would be very helpful to have students who analyzed this list activity pass along their suggestions to future groups of faculty and students who are planning to engage in list collaboration.

While listserves within a specific class can more natural follow the course of events related to the class, the addition of different class topics at different universities complicates the situation. In such situations, the meaning of the list communication needs to be artificially stimulated at the being of the activity, for it is not likely to emerge by itself.. After all, students are very busy and have everything else in their lives to attend to prior to something that appears to be an "add on" to their class. In the future, we recommend that a definite structure be applied to such list communication and even though the instructors want the students to assume the lead, the students will welcome the instructors' commentary to the list as well. While it is true that students will be intimidated by faculty comments that are counter to their own, they can benefit from faculty participation in the list. Both students and faculty could help to establish the guidelines for list operation, thus helping to create a sense of democracy while at the same time providing more meaning to the list by helping to establish a sense of community that reaches across campuses at the beginning of the semester.

References

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